THE WAY HOME

DAVID A. NEEL

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PREFACE

facing
David Neel Self-Portrait mask, 1993
alder wood, paint, horsehair, cedar bark, and copper, 20 × 11 × 7 in.

WHEN I BEGAN to organize the material for this book, it took a great deal of soul-searching to decide what to include and what to leave out. Initially, I thought the book would describe my unusual art practice, which includes woodcarving, hand engraving, photography, writing, painting, and printmaking. But I soon realized that an account of how I found my way back to the traditions and culture of my father's people after two and a half decades away was a story worth telling. My people, the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw, the traditional inhabitants of the coastal areas of northeastern Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia, have a rich traditional culture that includes masks, dances, canoes, totem poles, stories, and much more. My father, an artist, returned to the ancestors when I was an infant, and for many years I lost the connection with that aspect of my life. Shortly after his death, in 1962, my mother and I moved away, and I began a circuitous journey that wouldn't take me back to British Columbia until 1987.

If my story were a typical one, like that of the many Indigenous people who as children were adopted out or separated from their families, I would have lived my life never knowing my father's family or our heritage. It is a rare thing for an Indigenous person to come home to his or her people after decades away. In all cultures family and heritage become undefined and intangible when you've been away for a long

above
Carving a totem pole.

time. The sense of having a place of origin fades until it is a dim memory. But, somehow, I always knew I would reconnect with the people portrayed in my father's paintings – although it took me twenty-five years to realize how that could be accomplished.

Although I didn't have my father to teach me about our culture, I had the rich symbolism of his art, and it nourished my young mind and gave me a vision. Art communicates at an intuitive level through symbols, which can express gigabytes of information. Carl Jung says, "The underlying primal psychic reality is so inconceivably complex that it can be grasped only at the furthest reaches of intuition, and then but very dimly. That is why we need symbols." Symbols speak to the soul, to the primitive psyche, communicating coded messages that bypass the conscious mind to communicate to a deeper part of the brain.

Northwest Coast art is rich in symbols, and those symbols played an essential role in my early life, helping to form my emotional and psychological foundation. I grew up surrounded by my father's art, and although I had no one to explain the imagery to me, no one to teach me about the Trickster and the Transformer, those images spoke to me and affirmed that there were people and a culture that I belonged to. My father, his family, and our people were embodied in images of

masks, canoes, and dancers that communicated to some inner part of me, so that as a child I never completely lost touch with our culture – though I had yet to see an actual mask, a canoe, or a totem pole. My father's art represented that world, and it kept a small but persistent ember smouldering inside me, waiting to be fanned into a flame. And that moment would come, years later, in the most unexpected place, thousands of miles from home.

In 1986, I was living in Dallas, Texas, thirty-six hundred kilometres to the south, when was I called home by my great-great-grandfather Charlie James (Yakuglas). I was twenty-seven years old, I had a house, and I had a promising career as a photographer – I'd already had three solo exhibitions in Dallas. I sold everything, loaded up my Honda Accord, and drove north to pursue my vision of becoming a Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw artist, like generations of my family before me. I had no contacts and no game plan, just a burning desire to follow in the family footsteps. When I returned to British Columbia, I found that few Indigenous people are able to find their way home after many years away, and even fewer are able to immerse themselves in the traditional culture. How does a person go about reconnecting with long-forgotten relations and a culture that is distinct from and at times in opposition to non-Indigenous society? If that person were able to reconnect with their roots, would they find that the values, beliefs, and social norms were compatible with their own? And, most importantly, would they be welcomed and accepted by their people after being so long away?

In hindsight, it seems audacious to have expected to return and simply become an Indigenous carver, but my ability to believe in the improbable served me well. Through a combination of good luck and a stubborn nature, I was able to achieve my dream. How was it done, you ask? Well, that's an interesting story …

3/ MASKS
HOMECOMING

KOLUS COMES DOWN FROM THE SKY WORLD

In ancient times, a Kolus liked to come down from the sky world to rest at a lake that the local people called Sitting Alone Lake. Over time, he decided to live there, so he took off his Kolus mask and transformed into a man. He took the name Chief Surpassing and built a big house near the lake. The lake fed into a river, where he built a salmon weir to catch fish to feed himself. He was alone and longed for companionship, so he took two alder trees and carved the shape of two men and two women in the bark. Then he said, "Now you will become real people," and he returned to his big house. In the morning, he returned to find living men and women stuck to the alder trees. He pulled them off and they became his family.

He showed them how to roll stones together in the river and make themselves a weir to trap salmon. Then they cut down red cedar trees, and he helped them make big houses close to his own, and now they had a village. The next day, he purified himself by bathing in a mountain stream, and then he went hunting for food for the village. When he returned, he had many geese and deer, and he showed the people how to make the skins into clothing. Eventually, the Kolus longed to see his home, so he put on his mask, transformed himself into a bird again, and flew back to the sky world.

facing
Tsegame the Great Magician
mask, 2017
alder wood, acrylic paint, and Canadian and American coins, 17 × 12 × 10 in.

Tsegame, the Great Magician of the Red Cedar Bark, had great powers, including the ability to transform into animals. On his head is the frog and his mouth is the Kolus (Thunderbird), with the wings on his cheeks, which represents the powers that were given to him.

facing top
Wayne Alfred, working on a totem pole in Vancouver. I apprenticed with him for two years, starting in 1987, which laid a strong foundation in traditional Kwakwaka'wakw art.

facing bottom
Beau Dick, an important mentor of mine, carving a totem pole in 1987 that now stands in Stanley Park, Vancouver.

The people continued to live by Sitting Alone Lake, and with the knowledge they had gained from Kolus they prospered. Today, the descendants of Chief Surpassing use the Kolus mask as their crest and perform the goose dance in their feasts.

In 1987, after an absence of twenty-five years, I returned to Vancouver and moved into a house in the city's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, two blocks from City Hall, on Cambie Street. I was still doing the street photography that I'd been doing in Mexico and Dallas, and I would take my Nikon camera and walk the streets, photographing the people I met. My experiences in Mexico and Dallas had taught me to work with the public and to improvise with a camera. One day, I was walking the neighbourhood taking photographs when I came across a totem pole that was being carved just a few blocks from my house. It was a Sunday, and no one was working; I resolved to return the next day. Finding carvers working there the next afternoon, I introduced myself and asked if I could photograph them. The carvers were Beau Dick, Wayne Alfred, and Lyle Wilson, who would later be recognized as three of the best artists of their generation. Lyle was Haisla, and Beau and Wayne were Kwakwaka'wakw from Alert Bay, where my family had roots. They referred to me as "Ellen Neel's grandson," and they were happy to let me take photographs. After hanging around the carving site for a couple of weeks, I expressed an interest in learning to carve, and they agreed to help me get started.

Whether by chance or destiny, within two weeks of returning to Vancouver, I was carving. My first carving was a Thunderbird mask. The totem poles in Stanley Park by Grandpa Charlie and Grandma Ellen

both had a Thunderbird on top, and I knew that was the main crest of my family. There was a lot of wood left over from Beau's totem pole log, and with his assistance I chopped out a block of cedar and set to work.

At that time, I was working to establish my photography business in Vancouver, so I did photography in the mornings and evenings, and I carved in the afternoons. The carvers used a teaching method that has been in use for many generations. They carved a small section on one side of my mask, which I would have to match on the other side. It was a good method that I found quite challenging in the beginning. With their expertise, they could carve an area in two minutes that would take me hours to achieve something similar.

Our old carving site is now the City Square Mall, at Cambie and 12th Avenue. The food court sits where our carving trailer used to be. Those were memorable days. I didn't yet have the skills to help with the totem pole, which now stands in Stanley Park, but I showed up every afternoon diligently and learned carving and Kwakwaka'wakw culture from the masters. A totem pole in progress is always a destination for the First Nations community, and other carvers often came by to visit and sometimes to block out a piece of wood for a mask. I got to meet carvers from a number of tribal nations, including Russell Smith (Kwakwaka'wakw), Joe Peters (Kwakwaka'wakw), Isaac Tait (Nisga'a), and Ron Telek (Nisga'a), all of whom have returned to the ancestors. Russell was quite knowledgeable about Kwakwaka'wakw culture and an admirer of Grandpa Charlie's work, and he was happy to share his knowledge with me.

Vancouver had hosted Expo 86 the year before, and Northwest Coast Indigenous art had been discovered by an international audience, so the market was booming and there was an unquenchable

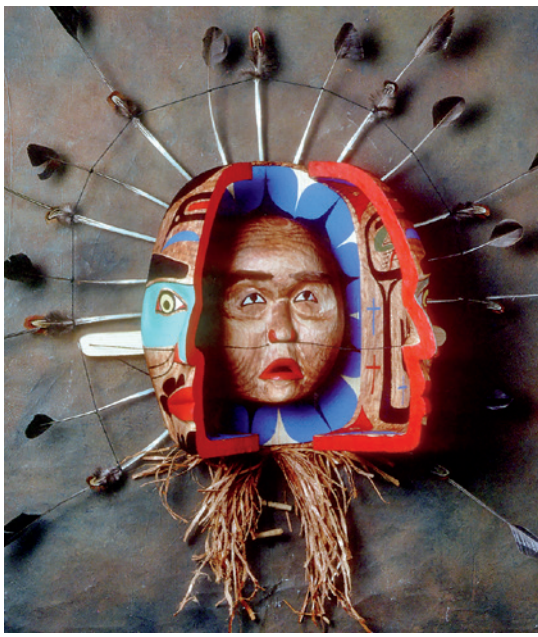
facing

Residential School **mask, 1990**
alder wood, paint, goose feathers, cedar bark, and ermine fur, 30 × 30 × 10 in.

This mask was carved years before the public became aware of the atrocities committed in Indian residential schools in Canada. At that time, it was something that people had no knowledge of or did not talk about.

appetite for quality carvings. The guys worked long hours, and they usually sold a mask every week. It was a rare time, with an endless supply of old-growth cedar, galleries that always wanted carvings, and a pool of talented traditional artists willing to share their knowledge. It wasn't until many years later that I appreciated how rare it is for an apprentice to have access to a group of such knowledgeable artists. I learned a great deal by watching and listening to Beau, who, at that time, was already a master of the wood, carving with a carefree ease and teaching with a lead-by-example approach. Wayne's approach was thoughtful and methodical, and he was patient and generous with his time and knew a great deal about traditional Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw culture as well as woodcarving. In the years since then, I've watched young carvers struggle to learn fundamental skills and gain knowledge of our traditions, and I am reminded of how Beau, Wayne, and the others helped me learn the traditional skills.

THAT SAME YEAR, I made my first visit to Alert Bay, an exciting and overwhelming experience. After being away from the BC coast and my father's people for my entire life, "the Bay" had taken on mythical proportions in my mind. I knew that my Uncle Bob, my father's younger brother, still lived there. He had long ago given up on living in Vancouver and had returned to the village where Grandma Ellen had been born and raised. He made hand-engraved jewellery for the local Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw people. I'd been given his phone number by my Aunt Cora, and I called him from Vancouver. I remember his shock when he answered the phone and I told him that I was his twenty-seven-year-old nephew and wanted to visit. He hadn't seen me since I was an infant, so he was surprised to hear from me and invited me to visit him.



It was a long trip. Getting to Alert Bay from Vancouver involved two ferries and required seven hours of driving. I recall seeing picturesque Cormorant Island for the first time as the ferry crossed to Alert Bay from Port McNeil. The municipal town is on the east side of the island, and the Kwakwaka'wakw village is to the west, with the ferry wharf in the middle. Visiting the place where my father's family had their roots made me feel both excited and apprehensive. Grandma Ellen was born there in 1916, and my father would be born in Vancouver twenty-one years later – the first generation of our family to grow up *off reserve*. My uncle welcomed me into his home in the village, where he lived with his wife, Gootsa. Uncle Bob prepared a meal of smoked salmon, herring eggs, and eulachon oil, which was delicious – my first taste of traditional Kwakwaka'wakw food.

Alert Bay is well known for its Indigenous art, and I made my way to the waterfront to visit the U'mista Cultural Centre. Kwakwaka'wakw-owned and -operated, the centre houses many masks and potlatch regalia from the turn of the twentieth century, masks carved by old-time masters such as Bob Harris, Charlie James, and Willie Seaweed. It was a surreal experience, like a dream coming to life, to see the cedar masks and dance regalia by the old-time master carvers – like the ones depicted in my father's paintings – for the first time.

Beside the museum was the building that was formerly Saint Michael's Indian Residential School, which my grandmother Ellen and many other Kwakwaka'wakw children had been forced to attend. As I gazed at the aging red-brick building, I tried to imagine what it must have been like for my grandmother to have been taken from her parents and forced to attend school in an abusive institutional environment.

front cover and page ii

***Ellen Neel, the First Woman Carver* mask, 1990**
alder wood, paint, and abalone shell, 16 × 11 × 6.5 in.

Portrait masks are an age-old tradition in Northwest Coast Indigenous culture. This one is a tribute to my grandmother, who is recognized as the first woman totem pole carver.

overleaf

Neel family members pose as a human totem pole, 1960. From bottom: Bob, Ted, Dave Senior, and Theo.

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